

Navigating Formal Elements in *The Assassin's Song* by M. G. Vassanji

Dr. Krupa Sophia Jeyachandran

Principal, Salem Christian College of Arts and Science, Salem, Tamilnadu

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Abstract:

Many novelists ingeniously incorporate these elements in their works for bringing across their views in a clear manner. These aspects accentuate the themes and assist the readers in grasping the propositions exactly as the author intended while creating his works. Similarly, M. G. Vassanji has incorporated a wide-range of formal elements in *The Assassin's Song* in order to accentuate the larger theme of his novel. Formal features like the use of various narrative structures, style and diction, imagery, symbols and motifs, magic realism, use of local words (Hindi, Urdu, Swahili, Gujarati, Kutchi), figures of speech, chapterization of the novels and the titles of the respective chapters, titles of the novels, ambivalence and irony, bildungsroman technique, myths, riddles and indigenous traditions have been utilized by M. G. Vassanji in his works taken for our study. They shall be discussed within the folds of this paper with accurate examples from the respective texts.

Introduction:

Formal elements play a significant role in enhancing the themes of any novel. It is only because of the formal devices that the themes of the respective works are expounded effectively. Many novelists ingeniously incorporate these elements in their works for bringing across their views in a clear manner. These aspects accentuate the themes and assist the readers in grasping the propositions exactly as the author intended while creating his works. Formal features like the use of various narrative structures, style and diction, imagery, symbols and motifs, magic realism, use of local words (Hindi, Urdu, Swahili, Gujarati, Kutchi), figures of speech, chapterization of the novels and the titles of the respective chapters, titles of the novels, ambivalence and irony, bildungsroman technique, myths, riddles and indigenous traditions have been utilized by M. G. Vassanji in his works taken for our study. They shall be discussed within the folds of this paper with accurate examples from the respective texts.

About the novel *The Assassin's Song*:

The Assassin's Song shortlisted for the Giller Prize in 2007 and the Crossword Prize in India. In *The Assassin's Song* (2007), Vassanji has deftly inserted Gujarati history, folklore

and other indigenous features. The story of the thirteenth century Sufi Nur Fazl is mentioned in the novel with utmost detail. Pirbaag is the shrine of the Sufi under the judicious care of the Dargawallah family. The shrine is central to the novel and all the events, episodes and characters are either overtly or covertly linked to the shrine. Karsan, the next in line to the Saheb-ship of the shrine denounces his title and wants to be an ordinary boy with interests in cricket and reading. His early-1960s childhood is similar to that of other boys like Harish and Utu of Haripir. The needy seek out Karsan's father, whom they regard as a saintly figure. Karsan himself comes to realise that he is likely to become heir to this status, as his father inherited it before him from his father.

One day he examines the books on the top shelf of the family library: editions of Shakespeare, science and philosophy lying in neat rows. The lower shelves were home to the folios detailing the shrine's history. While his father had put away the temptations of the outside world and confined himself entirely to the upkeep of the shrine and at always the disposal of its devout followers, Karsan is unsure whether he can do the same. More doubts surface when he realises that the woman in burqa is none other than his mother who had been going to watch movies at a theatre nearby with her friend. The outside world also challenges his faith: a local Hindu youth organisation counters his father's brand of Hindu-Muslim unity; a Christian teacher Mr. David with whom he makes friends is indicted of sodomy and is eventually expelled from Haripir.

Disillusionment starts seeping in his life as he becomes more meditative and contemplative about his faith and its relevance in the present scenario. He is further disheartened when, one night, he sees his mother pouring ghee on the Sufi's eternal lamp. He had been thinking that the lamp is eternal and that's what all the followers of the shrine have been taught. He is perturbed by all the notions and decisions imposed upon him and sets off to Ahmedabad and engrosses himself in the exclusive company of books. That's how he sneaks an opportunity to leave for the U.S. When he arrives in America, much to the anguish of his heart-broken parents, he experiences the new found freedom and basks in it. But very soon he realises the irony and ambiguity that life presents him with. He says,

I couldn't help the feeling sometimes that I had stepped onto a tiny island, and no sooner had I done that than I had started to drift away. I was terrified, then, of drifting into nothingness, into an endless darkness, anchorless; without belief, without love; without a people or nation to go home to. Is that what freedom was?

(The Assassin's Song, 220)

His married life with Marge Thompson is short-lived as tragedy strikes in the form of his only son Julian's sudden death. He returns to India only to find the Pirbaag torn and in ruins because of the venomous communal riots that wrecked an indescribable havoc on people. At the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Karsan extensively researches on the group of assassins who lived in the Middle Ages in Central Asia. They were known as "Kaatils" or Killers and later migrated to many parts of the world facing immense persecution. Karsan is astonished to find that Nur Fazl was an assassin himself and escaped to Patan in Gujarat in the wake of tribulation.

With this revelation, Karsan assumes the role of the Saheb of Pirbaag; of course in a different manner. He does not possess the poised and the dignified aura that his father had when he was the Saheb of Pirbaag; rather Karsan is more down-to-earth and endorses realistic principles for the betterment of the society. He is the care-taker of the shrine as undertakes many activities of reform for the community. Life comes full circle as he ends up taking the very responsibility which he once ran away from. He gets back to his roots and achieves a sense of belonging. He says,

I am the caretaker of Pirbaag. I do advise people on their worldly affairs when called upon and supervise some projects in the town. The local school needs revamping, working parents need a daycare, the potters need new tools, and so on. And the mausoleum remains a place for worship for those who need it. There are many who do, and they come in numbers on Saturday.

There are those who will touch my feet or my sleeves, ask for blessings. I flinch, internally, and try to cope without wounding. An old woman, bent almost double, came once and grabbed my hand, ran my fingers slowly all over her soft but spotted face, shocking me to the core. Did I know her? I could not quite tell. But as I attend to these people, unable to disappoint, to pull my hand or sleeve away, as I listen in sympathy and utter a blessing, a part of me detaches and stands away, observing. Asking, Are you real?

The answer is not simple.

But here I stop, to begin anew. For the call has come for me, again, and as Babu-ji would say, this time I must bow.

(The Assassin's Song, 367-368)

Vassanji's style and craftsmanship:

The Assassin's Song flaunts Vassanji's exquisite craftsmanship through the repetition of images, symbols and folk aspects. The novel is composed in the first person narration. The author has adroitly exploited the technique of dialogue, debates, conversation and magic realism in this novel. *The Assassin's Song* apparently makes use of written as well

as oral narration. The author's approach of balancing mythological and traditional narratives from Islamic and Hindu sources gains fruition in this novel. The use of non-English terminology in the text beautifully portrays cultural distinctiveness. These variations bring out the difference between cultures and beautifully exhibit the importance of various cultural traditions and norms. Vassanji has provided an elaborate list of a glossary of non-English words at the end of the particular novel to assist his readers. When he describes the truck, he says that it is: "covered all over with pithy sayings – 'Jai Mata Di! Horn Please ... OK !'" Oh Evil – eyed One, Your Face Black With Shame: My India Great!' (35). The function of oral traditions in the novel is to help the author to move freely between his past and present. Moreover, it also aids the novelist to counter the hegemonic narrative and eventually to preserve his ethnic values. The story of Karsan is connected with that of the sufi Nur Fazl, the founder of the shrine of Pirbaag.

As a conventional narrative mechanism that characterizes Vassanji's novel, *The Assassin's Song* opens with an epigraph that highlights the prominent theme "song is being". Vassanji not only uses epigraphs but he also employs captions for each section with a view to present his thoughts and concerns. He beautifies the real story with fictional innovation which eventually speaks volumes about his craftsmanship. He declares that "the verses purporting to tell the story of Nur Fazl and appearing as epigraphs to certain of the chapters in this novel are pure inventions" (369). Vassanji's framework of *The Assassin's Song* is built up with opening epigraphs in every episode and section. The technique of playing with metaphors is another highpoint of Vassanji's writing. In fact, it is only because of utilisation of the particular technique that the novelist employs that the themes of the novels are brought to the forefront with ease.

Vassanji carefully crafts his narratives that intensify our understanding of the Asian-African in Africa and Canada. Vassanji like many immigrant writers in Canada seeks to find new-fangled techniques for the narration. Some of the novels like *No New Land* are exclusively set in Canada, whereas *The Gunny Sack*, *The Magic of Saida*, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* are set in Africa and Canada alike. *The Assassin's Song* is predominantly set in India and then the narrative shifts to the United States of America and Canada. There is a skilful intermingling of more than two cultures, innumerable characters and a whole lot of imagery.

The book imagery:

The image of a book is at the centre of the novel. There were particular verses which traders and community members kept as a secret. The three padlocked books preserved in Ji Bai's gunny sack remain a mystery and it seems to be a tough task for Sona, who does intensive research to understand them. The secrets locked in these books cannot be fully

decoded. Similarly, in *The Assassin's Song*, the focus is on the "bol" or secret verse which is passed down to the successive generations. Vassanji brings to light the oral tradition followed in certain parts of India. As the heir apparent to the shrine of Pirbaag, Karsan is passed down the secret verse by his father. After persistent research on the history of the Assassins of the Middle Ages, Karsan deciphers the meaning of the verse. To his dismay, the meaning captured in these verses revealed the identity of Sufi Nur Fazl who was an "Assassin" or "Kaatil". The novel begins with Karsan at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla where he embarks on a research. After meticulous retrospection and diligent research, he comes to the conclusion that the Assassins belonged to Central Asia during the Middle Ages.

Narrative Structure:

Vassanji uses the first person narration in most of his works. In *The Assassin's Song*, Karsan narrates his tale after the calamity, from the Postmaster's Flat, Shimla. This technique enables the author to leisurely move back and forth in time, memory and space. The first person narration facilitates the author to retrieve and remember the past consciously. The novel begins in the present, shifts back to the past when Karsan remembers his childhood and adolescence, traces the history of his community and closes in the present with an optimistic note on the future. *The Assassin's Song* evidently employs written as well as oral history. The author blends mythological and traditions of narrative from Islamic and Hindu sources. The technique of using non-English lexical items is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness. It signifies the difference between cultures and stresses the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts. Vassanji's strategy here can be described as deliberate and thoughtful as he sincerely endeavours to incorporate cultural norms, socio-linguistic utterances and a whole lot of history. The traditional technique of building tale and circling back from the present to the past are all features of Indian and oral narrative tradition. This technique is ably employed by Vassanji through Karsan who recalls the past (dating back to the thirteenth century, from the arrival of Sufism, pre-colonial times, partition, Chinese war, Gujarat riots).

Epistolary style:

In *The Assassin's Song* the letters are used and exploited as the best means of communication for Karsan and his father when the former was in Boston-Harvard engaged in prestigious academic pursuits. There are chapters which progress only through letters. The main plot of the novel is profoundly sustained by the epistles. They pave way for Karsan's thirst for metaphysics, his threadbare broodings of the legacy that he was connected to and his ambition to carve a niche of his own in the modern materialistic world.

Magic Realism: Vassanji also proficiently employs elements of witchcraft and borderline magic realism in his writings. There is subtle splatter of the technique of magic realism in the novel.

Use of native utterances in the novels:

Vassanji is extremely insightful about the pulse of his writing. He endeavours to uphold the congruence between language and natural rhythm. He makes sure that the course of his narratives remains unbroken. Hybridity in the post-colonial diasporic milieu can be experienced in language as well. The immense scale of diasporic displacement has resulted in an assorted range of inflexions and variations in English by infusing new words and phrases from the local languages and dialects. Since Vassanji is a fluent speaker of Swahili, expressions from the language come to him spontaneously. The hybrid language that Vassanji uses – English with ounces of Cutchi/Gujarati and Swahili (as discussed in the succeeding paragraphs) – not only helps in pitching the cultural difference of the Shamsis, but is also a political declaration as it asserts and safeguards a specific cultural province to which the work belongs, “It redeems a marginalized language from anonymity and gives it a certain value and importance. The foreign words are used frequently and in a very subtle manner, as though they naturally belong in that conversation” (Narula, 127).

Conclusion:

Just as homelands and histories are fascinations for Vassanji, so is his concern for tradition, values and culture. Through the relevant use of language, folklore and the brilliant use of metaphors, images and symbols in his works, Vassanji recollects the racial and ethnic circumstances of the Shamsis. The need for recording history and ethnicity becomes essential for a writer who, like the community he describes in his fiction, has a history of trans-continental migration and double displacement. The minority Ismaili community, whom Vassanji fictionalizes as Shamsis has a syncretic culture which mingles the tenets of Hinduism and Islam. Although they try to keep their ethnic specificities in East Africa intact, cross – cultural interactions cause further hybridization. There is an addition of the African module to their hybridity.

Stuart Hall, in his essay “New Ethnicities” remarks: “The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned and situated and all knowledge is contextual” (446). One of the most significant ways in which ethnic groups recognize themselves is through language. Language as a fundamental conveyor of symbols, ideas and beliefs also becomes a prevailing possession in itself, something which has to be safeguarded and sustained as one of the major symbols of ethnic identity. Discussing the inter-relationship between language, culture and identity Ngugi wa Thiong’o says:

Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values ... which are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of a human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. (wa Thiongo 289)

Some writers exercise a premeditated effort to make use of their national, ethnic and religious myths, belief, aesthetic outlook and even language. They bring in words, expressions and phrases from their native languages. This makes the text hard to comprehend and difficult to communicate with people who do not come from the same background as the author. Providing a glossary, as Vassanji does in his works, certainly helps in figuring out the intended meaning to a great extent. Although providing a glossary is outmoded, Vassanji comments (as quoted in Dyer),

The meaning I put in my glossaries are meanings you would not find in a Swahili or Indian dictionary. There are words and pronunciations of words that were used and made up within a growing culture that I knew. I don't think you need a glossary at the end of my book to read the novel; but I think it adds another dimension like another chapter, for anyone who is interested. (Dyer 20)

The meaning of words is also unquestionably connected to the discourse of the place or to their situatedness. The writer is subject not only to the position of discourses but to the reader as well. In Ashcroft's words: "The reader is present, as a *function*, in the writing of the text. Thus, the relationship between the social forces and the "text" is the same as that between the linguistic system and the "text" of a particular worldview: neither causal nor representative, but co-extensive." (Ashcroft, *Transformation*, 72)

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